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Symbolism of Light and Darkness in Selected Prose and Poetry of John Donne

Evelyn Simpson in her critical edition of *The Sermons of John Donne* notices that light, and especially the morning, was among Donne's favourite images. Simpson likewise mentions that of all the Anglican divines of the period, it was only Donne that made frequent use of the translation of *Christ Oriens* as Christ the *Sun* or *East* (Simpson 1964 X: 304).[1] Even in his earlier poetry, John Donne had already demonstrated his fondness for using light and its cognate – the sun – in various conceits, often pointing out the implications of the contrast between light/day and darkness/night. Suffice it here to mention some of Donne's earlier poems, such as "The Sun Rising," in which the indignant lover scolds that "busy old fool, the unruly sun," whose "reverend beams" can be "eclipsed and clouded with a wink," thus demonstrating the power of love. Or the speaker of "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day being the shortest day," who – employing expressions indicating degrees of light and darkness, e.g. "Lucy" (light), day, and "midnight" or "the sun [that is] spent" – refers to himself, again in contrast to the riches of light, as "re-begot of absence, darkness, death." Yet far from this pose of an arrogant or sometimes even desperate lover, it is in the religious works that Donne's use of light and darkness reaches its spectacular heights of metaphysical conceit.

The scope of the present paper does not allow an extensive study of this important topic, therefore demonstration and examination of Donne's ingenious use of the symbolism of light and darkness will take place here only on the example of a few selected religious poems and homilies. The intention of the paper is to prove that in using the images of light and darkness Donne goes far beyond the expectations connected with what has become known as the metaphysical metaphor. The poet-preacher does not merely juxtapose contrasting

[1] The critical edition of John Donne's sermons mentioned here is of ten volumes. When Simpson's commentary in this edition is cited, the number of the volume in Roman numerals, followed by the number of the sermon and finally of the page are provided. In quoting the sermons, the number of the volume is provided in Roman numerals, followed by the number of the sermon and finally of the page.

images for the sake of displaying his intellectual sharpness and impressive wit. It has been claimed that Donne in his religious poetry often employs conflicting images because it is the natural state of a typically "democratic" character who refuses to attach himself to one particular mode of thinking (Coffin 1958: 49). It has also been argued that the metaphysical metaphor so well-known as the literary trademark of Donne has been the emotional by-product of an acute and intense intellectual process (Eliot 1993: 86). In my opinion, this choice of technique springs, especially in his religious poetry, from other reasons. It has its roots in a conscious decision on the part of the poet to go far beyond the limits of language play. The metaphysical conceit is used here to strengthen the power of a deeply religious conviction. The poems and homilies, selected for analysis in the present paper, point at Donne's concentration on one of the most difficult problems – the Christian paradox of suffering. It is in dealing with this question that the poet-preacher most successfully employs the strategy of "conceited" imagery.

The richness and complexity of metaphysical conceit in Donne's religious poetry is best displayed in his use of light. Light is something that not only follows darkness in a logical sequence or order of things. As has already been mentioned, in the Christian world-view light and its cognate the sun have been often used as the metaphor for Christ as the Oriens, the rising Sun that breaks through the darkness of sin and suffering. Thus Donne uses these images not only to show that light follows darkness in the same way that day follows night. Rather, the choice of these contrasting images demonstrates how light, particularly Christ the Sun, not only *belongs* with night-darkness but *breaks through* darkness in "reverend beams." Following the logic implied in the images, the other direction also appears as illuminating: darkness begets light, in the same respect as night "gives birth" to a new day.

Understanding this imagery of night-darkness as the prelude to day-light is something crucial in understanding Donne the speaker's seemingly masochistic choice to persist in night-darkness. This willingness to choose the conditions of night-darkness understood not only as a metaphor for the state of suffering and even sin is explained by the fact that with night-darkness comes day-light. Moreover, with night-darkness standing for suffering-sin comes a union with light-day in Christ the Sun.

In her Introduction to *The Sermons of John Donne* Simpson convincingly argues that the image of light was mostly used by the preacher to describe God's majesty and mercy (Simpson 1964 X: 303). This was later elaborated into the scripturally inspired symbol of light as the Messiah, to be finally explored as

the "Christ the Oriens" theme, that is Christ as the Rising Sun dispersing the shadows of darkness of sin and strife. If we turn to Donne's poetry, composed in the years preceding Donne's priestly career, we can likewise see the frequent use of the imagery of Christ as Light superior to the rays of the natural sun – the light that rises in the East and disperses not only natural darkness. So, for example, in the poem "Resurrection, Imperfect" the speaker conveys a complex message through the conceit in which "the old sun" (i.e. the natural sun) which went through an eclipse (i.e. darkness) on Friday – the day of Jesus's Passion, is juxtaposed with "a better Sun" – Christ who "enlighten'd Hell/And made the dark fires languish in that vale" (the reference to the power of the risen Christ demonstrated in the Harrowing of Hell). Another example of the similar representation of Christ as East can be found in the poem "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward." Here the speaker juxtaposes the two seemingly contrary poles of his journey, in its geographical and spiritual sense: on a day such as Good Friday, he should have his "soul bent towards the East," but, paradoxically, he is heading for the West:

> Hence is't, that I am carried towards the West
> This day, when my Soules forme bends towards the East. (ll. 9–10)[2]

Like in the other poems of that period before Donne's ordination, we can see how the two extreme poles, apparently opposite directions, East and West, are united in Christ. The East, referring to divine majesty in the rising sun and to the Resurrection of Christ, is reconciled with the West, which seems to allude to Christ's death on the cross in the setting of the sun. This is well illustrated in the poem "Upon the Annunciation and Passion falling upon one day. 1608."

> Th'Abridgement of Christs story, which makes one
> (As plaine Maps, the furthest West is East)
> Of the Angels *Ave*,' and *Consummatum est.* (ll.19–21)

In the poem already cited above, "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," Donne also mentions Christ the Son of God as that sun, which "by rising set / And by that setting endlesse day beget," referring directly to the paradox of the Passion and Redemption:

[2] All the excerpts of Donne's poems are taken from Helen Gardner's edition of Donne's poetry entitled *The Divine Poems*. The numeration of the lines of the selected verses follows this edition as well.

There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,
And by that setting endlesse day beget;
But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,
Sinne had eternally benighted all. (ll. 11–14)

This is the speaker's image of the East where he does not want to go or even look at. This is the place of Christ's Passion, of His "rising on the cross" – the place where the mystery of His Death and Resurrection is demonstrated in the oxymoronic expression "a Sunne, by rising set." Travelling West understood as travelling towards the end of the day, that is night and darkness, is seen here as a conscious choice on the part of the speaker (motivated by "pleasure, or business"). Contrary to Barbara Lewalski's interpretation of the poem, where the rise of emergent business is seen as deliberately used by the poet to demonstrate a disrupted and failed attempt at meditation (Lewalski 1979: 279), I would agree along the lines of Louis Martz, who has argued that in the Goodfriday poem the speaker is preparing himself for the meditation of the Cruxifixion of Christ as a prelude to a more interior contemplation of this scene (Martz 1962: 71–72). For, it is in the East that the most important things take place – and therefore spiritually (his "soul's form") – the rising Sun that is at the same time setting (dying) does not initiate eternal night nor darkness, but in thus "setting" in fact begins everlasting light ("endlesse day beget").

Following the images of light and darkness associated with theme of Death and Resurrection, or Passion and Redemption, it is necessary to move to Donne's two later poems, "A Hymne to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany," most probably composed in 1619, and "A Hymn to God my God, in my sickness,"composed after Donne's illness of the winter of 1622–1623. In the first poem, the speaker after contemplating the "sea of [Christ's] blood," understands the need to unite his own sacrifice to the holocaust offered by Christ. Finally, in a tone of expiation but also of self-giving, the author, in self-abandonment to Christ, closes the poem with the following lines:

Churches are best for Prayer, that have the least light:
To see God only, I goe out of sight:
And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse
An everlasting night. (ll. 29–32)

The paradox of darkness and blindness creating ideal conditions for confiding prayer and faith may here be taken to refer to at least two things. Firstly, the speaker obviously means the churches' interiors. The lack of light in a church

facilitates prayer since attention is better focused on the centre of the church, the altar and tabernacle. But the author's readiness to admit blindness ("goe out of sight") in choosing an "everlasting night" also seems to suggest the willingness to experience suffering so as to be more detached from any form of consolation and thus grow in trust and faith in God alone. Here darkness is understood not only as the lack of physical brightness but also as persistence in the darkness and loneliness of suffering and strife. The speaker willingly chooses these conditions, for they allow him to be absolutely detached from any form of compensation, physical or spiritual.[3]

The same ideas were expressed in the homilies, where Donne pointed to the firm trust in Divine Providence in the moments of darkness. The recurring refrain is that of God as the Almighty God of Light, who rules over darkness itself and is able to draw goodness and light even out of evil and darkness. One such fragment worth considering is taken from a sermon preached on Christmas Evening, at St. Paul's Cathedral, 1624. For this sermon, Donne chose to reflect on a verse from the prophet of Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord shall give you a signe; Behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and beare a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

> If some King of the earth have so large an extent of Dominion, in North, and South, as that he hath Winter and Summer together in his Dominions, so large an extent East and West, as that he hath day and night together in his Dominions, much more hath God mercy and judgment together; He brought light out of darkness, not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring; though in the wayes of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, though have been benighted till now, wintred and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupefied till now, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as the bud of the spring, but as the Sun at noon to illustrate all shadowes, as the sheaves in harvest, to fill all penuries, all occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons. (VI: 8, 172)

Donne here mentions God as the Lord of the entire earth, of all seasons, and as the One who brings light not out of "lesser light," but "out of darkness" itself. This "darkness" is meant here as a more spiritual kind of darkness brought about

[3] Clay Hunt (1954: 97) in his book on Donne poetry in fact argues that the central argument of this poem rests on the fruitful use of death and suffering for one's redemption. "The essence of the argument which the rest of the poem develops is that death and physical sufferings of his illness must be accepted willingly: first because it is only through suffering and death that man can reach heaven; second, because this experience forms a requisite of God's dealings with man that are to be just; and finally because Donne himself is confident of salvation through Christ's redemption."

by "fortune, understanding or conscience," hence signifying poverty, ignorance or even sin. It is precisely in these moments of strife that "God comes to thee," Donne continues, "not in the dawning of the day, not as the bud of spring, but as the Sun at noon to illustrate all shadowes [. . .] to fill all penuries." Christ not only is the Oriens, which is symbolized by the majestic beginning of a new day, but He is the light that shines despite, through and from the darkness of suffering. This theme is further developed by Donne in the Trinity Sermon delivered at St. Dunstan's, April 1627. Here the preacher meditates on the lines taken from Revelation 4:8, "And they do not rest day and night, saying, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God almighty, who was, and who is and who is coming.'"

> But even in the depth of any spirituall night, in the shadow of death, in the midnight of afflictions and tribulations, God brings light out of darknesse, and gives his Saints occasion of glorifying him, not only in the dark, (though it be dark) but from the dark (because it is dark). This is a way of unconceivable by any, unexpressible to any, but that be the night what night it will, be the oppression of what Extention, or of what Duration it can, all this retards not their zeal to Gods service, Nay they see God better in the dark, then they did in the light; Their tribulation hath brought them to a nearer distance to God, and God to a clearer manifestation to them. And so, to their Ingenuity, that they professe God, and their Religion openly, is added an Assiduity, that they do it incessantly. (VIII: 1, 53)

It is then the idea described above that underlies the speaker's choice of "an Everlasting Night" in the "Hymn to Christ, at the Authors last going to Germany," It is, as he explains, a consequence of his act of submission to God's mercy. The speaker wants to be wholeheartedly fixed in the contemplation of God, detached from any material and even spiritual consolation. Thus "to see God only," he opts to "go out of sight."

The way that leads from darkness to light, from suffering to God is, what I believe, the south-west discovery mentioned in the poem, "A Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness." To further appreciate this poem, it would be useful to refer to some excerpts taken from two other homilies, one of which was preached in the spring of 1623 on the Penitential Psalms and the other to the King at Court in April 1629.

For the sermon on the Penitential Psalms, Donne chooses to meditate on Psalm 6. 8–10. Here he reflects on the dejection of spirit experienced by King David on contemplating his sins. Donne argues that it is in these moments of being "troubled with a sense of the indignation of God," that precisely is the "storm past," for the soul is "on its way [. . .] to a calmness." He differentiates

between a dejection of spirit which rests in a faith in God's mercy and the sin of despair. Yet, Donne stresses that even sin itself can be an occasion to be reconciled with Christ. It is true that Christ is the Oriens and Lucifer, Filius Oriens. Yet even if one is "fallen *by* Lucifer and [so long not] *as* Lucifer," then the way already leads to the East, which, should the sinner repent, will eventually open to heaven.

> In a flat Map, there goes no more, to make West East, though be distant in an extremity, but to paste that flat Map upon a round body, and then West and East are all one. In a flat soule, in a dejected conscience, in a troubled spirit, there goes no more to the making of that trouble, peace, then to apply that trouble to the body of the Merits, to the body of the Gospel of Christ Jesus, and conforme thee to him, thy West is East, thy Trouble of spirit is Tranquility of spirit. The name of Christ is *Oriens, The East*; And yet Lucifer himselfe is called *Filius Orientis, The Son of the East*. If thou best fallen by *Lucifer*, fallen to *Lucifer*, and not fallen as *Lucifer*, to a senselessness of thy fall, and an impenitibleness therein, but to a troubled spirit, still thy Prospect is the East, is thy Climate is heaven, still thy Haven is Jerusalem; for, in our lowest dejection of all, even the dust of the grace we are so composed so layed down, as that we look to the East. [. . .] A troublesome spirit and a quiet spirit, are farre asunder; But a troubled spirit, and a quiet spirit, are neare neighbours. And therefore *David* meanes them no great harme, when hee sayes, *Let them be troubled;* For, Let the winde be as high as it will, so I sayle before the winde, Let the trouble of my soule be as great as it will, so it will direct me upon God, and I have calme enough. (VI: 1, 59)

In this passage, we see how Donne on the one hand argues that the East and West do lie at opposite poles, yet, when "upon a body" which, as he later explains, applies to "the body of the Merits, to the Gospel of Christ Jesus," the East and West are all one. What Donne calls the "body of merits," most probably refers to the Church of Christ, while the "Gospel," to the Word of God. Either way, in the Christian perspective, the East meets the West, and the West, which is sin, suffering and strife, all lead to the East, which is Christ. Hence, as Donne says, he allows himself to be subject to even the greatest forms of suffering, "Let the wind be as high as it will," for "it will direct [him] to God."

Donne further elaborates on the metaphors of the poles of the earth in the sermon on Genesis 1:26, preached to the King at Court, April 1629. Referring to the lines, "God said, Let us make Man in our Image, after our likenesse," he divides these concepts geographically and applies them to man. Since Christ is East, a Christian's "East" lies in his "confession of [his] East, that is the

confession of the Trinity. His West lies in his 'faciamus Hominem,' that he is made 'man.'" This Donne expounds further:

> [. . .] and man there, is but *Adam*: and *Adam* is earth, but red earth, earth dyed red in bloud, in Soul-bloud, the bloud of our soules. To that west we must all come, to the earth. *The Sunne knoweth his going down:* Even the Sun for all his glory, and heighth, hath a going the discomfort of mortality. (IX: 1, 49)

If the West then consists in being made man, that is in "this West [lies the] matter, substance [which] is but earth," then the North consists in the "dissipation of that darkness [. . .] that we are not all earth." For in man there is a "power" that overcomes that "low and miserable state, *In Imagine*." It is by virtue of this other "image" that man has that other "likeness, form" which "cannot die." It is by virtue of the soul, that immortal form which never yields to physical decay, that man is not pure matter, nor simply earth. Finally, it is in the South that man finds his "highest point." It is in this "Meridionall height" that man finds his "highest elevation." For, it is in this "noon," that man has knowledge that he is of the "image of God himself" (IX: 1, 50).

> And then, whose image and likenesse it is, is our Meridionall height, Our noon, our south point, our highest elevation; *In Imagine nostra, Let us make man in our Image.* Though our Sun set at noon, as the Prophet *Amos* speakes; though we die in our youth, or fall in our height: yet even in that Sunset, we shall have a Noon. For this Image of God shall never depart from our soule; no not when that soule departs from our body. And that's our South, our Meridioniall height and glory. (IX: 1, 50)

Thus even in those situations of "sunset – west," or even "sunset – physical death," there shall always be present our "noon, our south point, our elevation." Death cannot destroy nor conquer man's "meridional height and glory." Traversing thus through the south, which is the "divine image" in man, and the west, which is that "purely material," leads to the East, Christ. This is that "South-west discoverie," referred to in the "Hymn to God my God, in my sicknesse," where the idea of geographical south-west passage to the East islands is itself emblematic of death by fever – the sickness that was to kill the poet. But moving from this "south-west discovery" made by the physicians, the poet speaks of yet another, more personal discovery.

> Whilst thy physicians by their love are grown,
> Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
> Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown

That this is my south-west discovery
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die

I joy, that in these straits I see my west;
For, though, their currents yield return to none,
What shall my west hurt me? As west and east
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth through the resurrection. (ll. 11–20)

Of what importance is it that he sees his west, which is death, when he knows that "West and East in all flat maps are one"? He is, he insists, the sinful Adam, crowned with thorns and thrown down. But he is also the new Adam, Christ, who is crowned with victory over death awaiting the promise of resurrection.

We think that *Paradise* and *Calvarie*,
Christs Crosse, and *Adams* tree, stood in one place;
Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;
As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,
May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace. (ll. 21–25)

Hence it is this radical unity of East and West, light and darkness, that pervades Donne's prose and poetry and can be taken as a corrective of the rider of "Goodfriday," who though riding westwards, "bends his soul towards the East." In a reluctant and hesistant look at the One whose hands span the poles and who is lifted up on high, through that squinting gaze on that "sunset and noon," that "south and west," the rider in fact understands that it is in the West-death the he is reconciled with the East-life. It is in the same spirit that Donne encourages his listeners to "look towards the East," because Christ "looked into our west, from the east:"

> [...] then we looke towards our East, the fountain of light, and of life. There this world beganne; the Creation was in the east. And there our next world beganne too. There the gates of heaven opened to us; and opened to us in the gates of death; for, our heaven is the death of our Saviour, and there where he lived, and dyed there, and there he looked into our west from the east, from his Terasse, from his Pinacle, from his exaltation (as he himself calls it) the Crosse. (IX: 1, 50–51)

In conclusion it should be stressed that the present paper has been an attempt to demonstrate and examine how in his prose and poetry Donne understood and used the symbols of light and darkness. As has been illustrated above, the poet-preacher employs these symbols with their cognates day and night,

Christ and suffering and sin, building his complex conceits, rich in theological implications. Both in his prose and poetry, Donne shows that darkness is first of all an intrinsic part of light, in the same way that night is of day and sin, and suffering is with Christ. One cannot be fully understood without the other. It is not only for this reason that Donne often juxtaposes these seemingly contrasting symbols. He also makes a conscious effort to choose night, darkness, suffering, precisely because it is not only the prelude but an inseparable part of day, light and Christ.

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